

Heavy Hand of Steinbrenner A Burden on Yankee Chances

By MURRAY CHASS

New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 25, 1980;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)

pg. C7

Heavy Hand of Steinbrenner A Burden on Yankee Chances

By MURRAY CHASS

Back in the good old days of July, when the Yankees were winning an average of two games in every three, Reggie Jackson called upon the wisdom he had accumulated in five championship seasons and assorted other pennant races and said: "This can't go on forever. You can't play .670 ball forever."

Not many teams in major league history have, and Jackson, perceptive as always, was right this time. Applying his logic to the Baltimore Orioles, one

Analysis

must conclude that they cannot maintain the .769 pace at which they have played in catching the Yankees.

Baseball is a game of streaks and slumps. In recent weeks, the Orioles have been in a streak, the Yankees in a slump.

George Steinbrenner, despite his expanding knowledge of baseball, has not learned how to react to slumps and other unpredictable developments that occur in a pennant race. He would do well to listen to and learn from such race-hardened veterans as Jackson, and even take a cue from Billy Martin.

Calm Front Is Missing

Early in the 1978 pennant race, when the Yankees were collapsing in the face of a Boston Red Sox surge, Martin made it a point to appear calm in front of the players. "If I look like I'm panicking," Martin said, "the players will start panicking."

Two weeks ago, after three straight losses to the Orioles, two members of Steinbrenner's front-office brain trust met with the players and, among other things, told them not to be unduly alarmed.

"There is no reason for the players to panic," one observer noted. "Steinbrenner is panicking enough for everybody." He has panicked more since.

With more than six weeks remaining in the season, while the Yankees still held a two-and-a-half-game advantage over the Orioles, Steinbrenner began criticizing his manager, his star player and others on the team. He summoned his "baseball men" to Florida for a meeting, and called a meeting with the manager, the coaches and the trainers in Seattle.

Perceiving his team as a sinking ship

— and who should know more about ships than the chairman of the board of the American Shipbuilding Company? — the Yankees' principal owner thrashed around near Tampa Bay, then thrashed some more near Puget Sound. One more dunking, in the Hudson River perhaps, and the boss just might drag his employees down with him.

The last thing a slumping player wants to hear, and certainly not publicly, is that he is playing miserably. Steinbrenner unleashes public criticism because he feels it will make the players angry. And in Steinbrenner's mind an angry player, or a fearful one, might hit and pitch better. It is an old and questionable management technique and psychological tactic. But Jackson, for one, is not going to hit more home runs after reading that his boss said he "tanked" in Baltimore.

Jackson says a player must ride out a slump, but Steinbrenner could not wait for his players to do that. For sure, such previously reliable hitters as Rick Cerone, Eric Soderholm and Bob Watson suddenly were not producing runs. Nor were Ron Guidry and Tom Underwood pitching effectively.

Injuries that had plagued, but not buried, the Yankees all season continued, eroding the team's consistency. Graig Nettles, a fine third baseman and usually a reliable run-producer, has been out with hepatitis since July 23. Willie Randolph, the second baseman, who as the leadoff batter has been the offensive catalyst, is suffering with a bad left hip.

Soft Spot in Batting Order

If Nettles were available, he might have prevented the mushrooming problem the Yankees had with the players batting fifth in their lineup. In a span of 27 games, from July 21 through Aug. 18, the last game with Baltimore, the Yankees' No. 5 hitters batted .183 and drove in a total of four runs in 109 times at bat. That made it easy for opposing pitchers to walk Jackson in sensitive situations and not worry about someone else driving in the runs.

The flurry of meetings held and the moves made by the Yankee brain trust were not necessarily what the team needed. Although the owner and his front-office executives have the right and the responsibility to make personnel moves, the Yankees' hierarchy seems to be playing with a heavy hand, getting into areas that probably are better left to the manager.

That is not to say that Dick Howser is going to use Bobby Murcer at first base just because Steinbrenner gives Murcer a first baseman's glove. But what about some other suggested moves?

Howser, for example, was not going to keep Clyde King from working with Guidry after Steinbrenner sent the troubleshooting scout to Seattle to do just that. Guidry admittedly has had problems, but he has received too much advice from too many directions. Trying to implement all of those suggestions can get confusing.

It should be remembered that Guidry pitched two solid games against Milwaukee before he was held back for two days before his next start, so he could pitch against Baltimore. The idea of

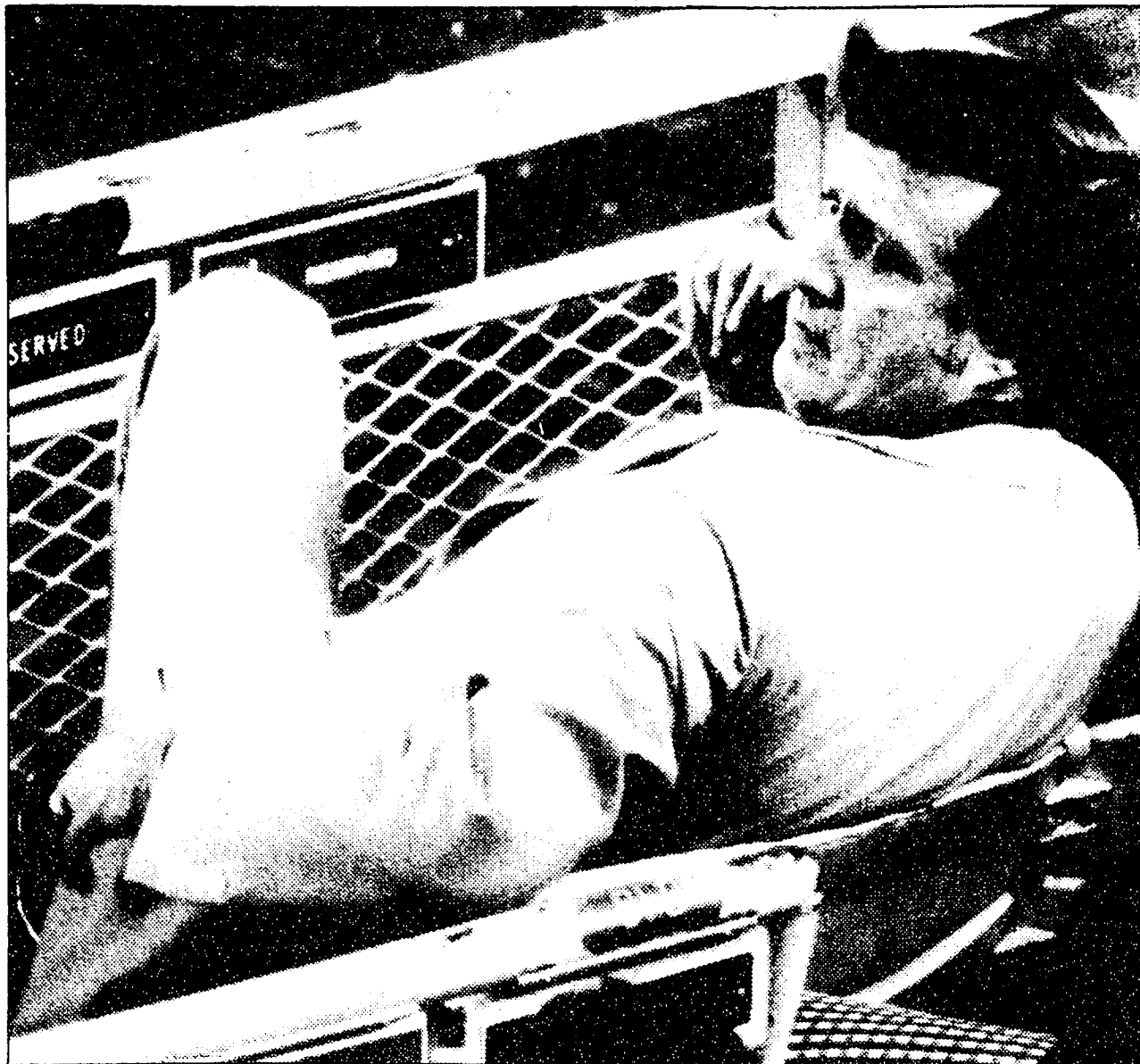
delaying Guidry's next appearance apparently was Steinbrenner's.

Then there was the strange case of Rudy May, probably the team's most consistently effective pitcher. After throwing two consecutive four-hitters May was dropped from the starting rotation and placed in the bull pen, where the Yankees needed an effective left-hander. That also apparently was the owner's idea.

The pitching staff has not proved to be as deep as it appeared in spring training. But with Tommy John winning his first seven decisions, Guidry his first five and Underwood six of his first seven as a starter, the lack of a good right-handed starter could be glossed over. That no longer is the case, and that is why the Yankees are hoping that 41-year-old Gaylord Perry can pitch young again.

The Orioles' primary strength is their pitching. Steve Stone is having the kind of year Guidry had in 1978, and Stone has led the Baltimore resurgence the way Guidry once led the Yankees' recovery from a 14-game deficit. But the Orioles also have been getting the timely hitting that was so vital to their success last season. The combination of the steady pitching and timely hitting will make Baltimore difficult to shake in these last six weeks.

To offset that force, the Yankees must get some consistent starting pitching, and they must rediscover their run-scoring button; the one that, when pressed, sent balls flying over the fences and runners scampering across the plate. Unfortunately for the Yankees, someone has been pushing the wrong button recently.



United Press International

George Steinbrenner: Yankee slumps still upset him and consequently upset his team even more